

Background ■

SC's agriculture industry creates an annual economic impact of \$33.4 billion and provides more than 450,000 jobs



For generations South Carolina's and the nation's agriculture and forestry system has given us abundant and low cost food for our tables, has grown fibers for the clothes we wear, and has preserved and enhanced our state's natural resources. Just 100 years ago, farming was a special way of life in this state. It was a time when farmers raised a wide variety of crops in a state that was mostly rural.

In 1900, South Carolina's population was a little over one million people. Nearly 90 percent of those people lived and worked on farms. Today, we have almost four million residents, with less than half living in farm areas and the balance living in urban areas. While the number of farms has gone down, the productivity of farmers has increased. The average farmer today produces enough food to feed 129 people.

Currently, the state's agriculture industry (including the production of food, fiber and forestry) creates an annual economic impact of \$33.4 billion and provides more than 450,000 jobs in South Carolina.

Agriculture has always been there for the people of South Carolina. Its benefits have been great for both the environment and family. But now, agriculture is overshadowed by a faster paced, more urban world. In short, we need to be there for agriculture, which in the past has been taken for granted and is now facing some serious issues, like:

- Rapid urbanization has generated questions concerning property rights protection, fair land use and land values and an increased need for infrastructure.
- Recent droughts have been devastating to South Carolina farmers and have brought to the forefront issues of water rights and usage.
- Global economics have greatly depressed farm commodity prices.
- The 1996 Farm Bill reduced federal support for farmers, leaving them more vulnerable to market forces and the whims of the weather.
- The increase in technology advancement - biotechnology, global information systems and computer technology - is creating an ever-changing work environment for farmers.
- The flow of technology, an asset so important to retaining a competitive advantage, has been slowed due to a reduction of funding for public agricultural research and education.

In February 1999 a group of representatives from South Carolina's leading agricultural, conservation and natural resources management organizations, government officials and academia held a series of meetings to establish a dialogue and to review the state of the State regarding agricultural and natural resources conservation policies. Their vision was the development of policy recommendations to enhance agricultural production, natural resources conservation, profitability and economic growth in South Carolina.

A report entitled "Prospects for Sustainability: A New Direction for Agriculture & Natural Resources Conservation" was developed and presented to Governor Jim Hodges on October 12, 1999. This report was the culmination of months of deliberation and discussions about the key issues facing South Carolina's agricultural industry and natural resources. As a result, Governor Hodges called for a summit on agriculture and natural resources to gain further insight and develop solutions to those issues to assist South Carolina's large, but troubled, agricultural industry, and further protect our state's valuable natural resources.

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■ Organization & History

Their vision was the development of policy recommendations to enhance agricultural production, natural resources conservation, profitability and economic growth in S.C.

■ Summit Planning Committee



Reaching a Consensus

Identifying solutions

■ **Breakout Sessions**

The summit agenda was designed to provide background information needed for meaningful discussion and recommendations. Keynote speakers discussed critical issues previously identified in the report “Prospects for Sustainability” and an SCETV special broadcast “Farming in South Carolina/ Proud Heritage, Uncertain Future.” The one-day conference included breakout sessions where attendees openly discussed issues and options for addressing the challenges and opportunities for real solutions at the state level.

Summit participants were assigned to one of five groups when they registered. Assignments were based upon results of a pre-conference survey in which participants ranked the five issues in order of importance as they related to or impacted each person's situation. The general topic areas were outlined as follows:

■ **Sustainable Economic Development** – level the playing field for agriculture with other industries in the state; establish parity for all agribusinesses in the areas of economic development, incentives and taxes; create state-funded cost share programs to leverage federal dollars; implement incentives to promote and sustain conservation programs for farmers; and, recruit businesses to produce value-added agricultural products

■ **Research, Educational & Marketing Programs** – develop new commodities; improve labor practices; provide and promote the use of innovative business and marketing plans; improve and invent new technologies; design risk management models; expand agricultural research

■ **Water Use and Environmental Issues** – define water use priorities during times of drought; identify water sources; implement science-based water and air quality regulations; define the role of the state in environmental regulations

■ **Urban Encroachment and Land Use Planning** – ensure property rights protections for agriculture; define fair land use and land values; develop public awareness programs to help urban dwellers appreciate rural lifestyles

■ **State Supported Ag Infrastructure** – provide for the protection and enhancement of state-supported infrastructure to better serve the agricultural industry.

Knowledgeable facilitators, recorders and resource professionals who were responsible for monitoring the discussion, recording the comments, and reporting the results supported each workgroup, which began by identifying issues related to their respective general topic area. Results were listed and prioritized. For the consensus high-priority issues, workgroups developed recommendations (what should be done) to resolve issues or address concerns. Facilitators presented summaries of the major issues and recommended solutions for their respective groups during the final session.



Throughout every session all participants agreed that new challenges and risks are dramatically shifting the way agricultural producers, and the agribusinesses that serve them, do business, that more change is on the way and there is a sense of urgency to address these challenges.

Many common themes emerged from the breakout sessions, i.e., profitability, incentives, increased funding for education and research, and the need for the state to have an agricultural “point-person” or “ag-czar.” The importance of agriculture to South Carolinians was also a common theme as participants articulated that agriculture extends beyond food and fiber supplies - it is also extremely important to the state's overall economic well-being.

The following is a recap of the March 2000 Summit recommendations in response to the participants' charge to find state-level solutions to some of the critical issues facing South Carolina's agricultural and natural resources system.

Four key themes emerged from the Sustainable Economic Development work group - profitability, economic impact, cost share programs and marketability.

PROFITABILITY

Profitability to the farmer means making a living from agriculture as he earns a reasonable return on his investment. This can best be done by

- Identifying alternative crops and resources
- Conducting research on input costs
- Conducting research and education programs focused on rural economic development
- Creating products for new markets
- Expanding farmer co-ops and encourage them to become involved in the marketing process
- Conducting social/economic impact research
- Certifying, labeling and promoting South Carolina grown products

ECONOMIC IMPACT

In order for South Carolina's full economic impact to be realized, agriculture must be at the table with other economic development decision makers. Specifically the following proposals were made:

- Appoint an agricultural representative as a member of the Governor's staff to represent the interests of agriculture to state boards, commissions and related groups.

Summary of Recommendations

◀ Sustainable Economic Development



- Appoint people with agri-business experience to state committees, boards and commissions.
- Form a comprehensive agricultural planning committee to develop a statewide strategic plan for agriculture to include conservation and natural resources. The committee would coordinate efforts of, establish priorities for, and develop policies among all agencies, organizations and committees that impact South Carolina's agriculture and natural resources systems.
- Create and fund an agriculturally integrated pro-active public relations and lobbying plan which represents interests of the agriculture and forestry industry, critical state agencies and research/education leaders promoting the fact that the state's supply of safe and affordable food is an important facet of South Carolina's economic well-being.

COST SHARE INCENTIVES

Full advantage should be taken of all available federal funds and other funding sources to maximize the state's leveraging ability. This can be accomplished by

- Appointing someone to identify all federal and other sources of funds to be used for agriculture and natural resources in South Carolina.
- Providing statewide recurring funds for a non-regulatory cost share program to assist land users in solving some of the state's environmental problems and to provide financial incentives to land users who implement Best Management Practices. This should be a 50/50 match.
- Providing research and education to establish Best Management Practices (BMPs) for farming and forestry enterprises and determine impacts of changing land use.
- Showcasing successful BMPs and benefits of cost share programs in order to increase public awareness and appreciation for the value of these programs.



MARKETABILITY

In order for agriculture to be taken seriously as a key player in the economic development realm of state government it must first be viewed as such. Therefore it is recommended that work be done to

- Ensure that the public and policy makers understand the positive impact agriculture has on our state through its protection, preservation and conservation of the environment and as the economic backbone for many rural communities in South Carolina.
- Market South Carolina agricultural and forestry products in such a way that farmers receive the highest prices possible for their commodities.

Three major themes emerged from the Research, Education and Marketing Programs work group. They include the need for a statewide vision for agriculture, the need to use mass media to promote the benefits of agriculture and natural resources to the state, and the need for comprehensive education and research programs to develop future technologies and products for farmers.

VISION FOR AGRICULTURE

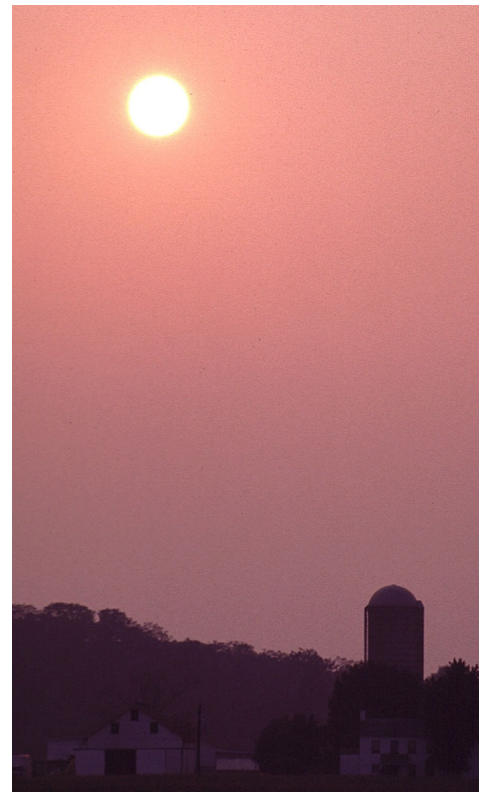
An articulated vision of what agriculture and natural resources is and what it needs to become is essential for the future success of the industry.

- Establish a Governor's Task Force to develop the state's vision and action plan for the future of agricultural research and technology transfer. This will help the state compete more effectively in the discovery of new genes, the facilitation of technology transfer, and the development of new products.
- Organize an alliance among members of South Carolina's business communities, research universities, and state government in order to build a healthy, high tech, knowledge-driven agricultural economy.

MARKETING AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The consensus was that agricultural marketing needs to be a total package. In addition to marketing specific commodities, a total plan and marketing package for South Carolina agriculture and natural resources would better serve the state's agricultural industry and help change public perceptions about the origin of food and fiber. In order to meet that goal the following needs to occur:

◀ Research Education & Marketing Programs





- Use the mass media to communicate to consumers the benefits of environmentally safe, healthy food and the value of using sound science on which to base regulatory decisions.
- Develop a comprehensive statewide marketing plan for South Carolina's agricultural and natural resources industries.
- Promote technology transfers between universities to assist farmers, agribusinesses and food markets to adapt to technological and market changes and to compete effectively.

RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Adequate and appropriate agricultural research and education is paramount to the future success and sustainability of South Carolina's agriculture industry. Therefore the following objectives must be met:

- Increased funding is essential in order to generate a better understanding of the dynamics of South Carolina's agricultural and natural resources base and to perform research with an educational transfer to producers and consumers.
- Develop and/or improve agricultural and environmental science education programs and offer them to all age groups and elements of society.
- Teach the value of agriculture, natural resources and forestry needs to students from elementary grades through college.
- Assemble a task force to identify existing successful agricultural and environmental educational modules and programs. This task force should include interested teachers, decision makers, landowners and others to create and/or identify existing curricula and teaching modules that can be easily incorporated into existing classroom activities. This group should also consider providing convenient teacher-training and generating incentives to increase participation in the use of these educational materials.
- Adequately fund the marketing and promotion of the educational and informational modules that are developed.

◀ State Supported Ag Infrastructure

The goal of the this work group was to develop South Carolina specific recommendations that would provide for the protection and enhancement of state-supported infrastructures to better serve the agricultural industry of the state. As the group discussed infrastructure, its focus turned to the need for help in broader areas of concern, which led them to list the following priorities: state funded cost share programs for “on-farm” infrastructure and conservation programs; agricultural public awareness and education programs; and finding ways to make water sources economically available for farm use.

STATE FUNDED COST SHARE PROGRAMS

This work group believes the state could do more to help farmers build agricultural infrastructure. This could be done by

- Developing state-funded grants, cost-share programs, redirecting tax money and offering tax credits to help build farm buildings, irrigation systems, conservation tillage systems, etc.
- Providing tax incentives to farmers and land owners who help solve some of the state's environmental problems and who implement best management practices.

EDUCATION

In order for there to be an appreciation of the needs of farmers, there should be a common, consistent message developed through which the public is informed about the value of agriculture and natural resources. Specifically -

- Educate the General Assembly and other policy makers about South Carolina agriculture and its importance to the state. This will ensure recognition and acknowledgment of agriculture as an industry and its role in the overall economy of the state.
- Form coalitions and cooperation among agricultural, urban and environmental interests to resolve conflicts. Create greater cooperation and improved working relationships among agricultural, urban and environmental communities.
- Provide in-service training for agricultural professionals and volunteers.
- Initiate a mass media public and consumer awareness campaign.
- Provide funding and continued support for formal and informal agriculture and natural resource research and education facilities, i.e., experiment stations.



Urban Encroachment & Land Use Planning



IRRIGATION

Irrigation and the infrastructure to get water to the farm were deemed very important. In order to make water resources economically available for farm use it is recommended that:

- A statewide irrigation project coordinator is secured.
- Policies are identified to make water available for farm use.
- The feasibility of irrigation is adequately researched.
- Funding is secured through grants, tax credits and tax revenues.

We are heading towards a future of fewer farms, more houses and more people per acre across South Carolina. While industry and development bring economic opportunities, they may place our state's farm land and natural resources at risk by producing increased air and water pollution, traffic congestion, and depletion of valuable lands. Two areas of concern emerged from this breakout session - Better Land Use Planning and Public Education and Communication. The following are potential solutions which emerged from this session:

BETTER LAND USE PLANNING

In order to protect and preserve our valuable natural resources and agricultural lands, it is essential that the future uses of land in South Carolina be better planned.

- A dialogue should be established among those who plan and build our developments, elected officials who set land use policies and citizens of this state in order to plan for the future.
- Ensure equitable zoning of residential, commercial and agriculture properties through adequate representation on zoning boards statewide.
- Make encroaching parties responsible for any required impact mitigation (buffers, setbacks, etc.).
- Ensure private property rights protection for agriculture and tree farming operations.
- Exercise parity in tax and other economic incentives between urban core revitalization and agriculture, forestry and green space protection.

PUBLIC AWARENESS (EDUCATION) & COMMUNICATION

The education of the public about land use issues is essential if South Carolina is to make the progress it needs to in order to protect its valuable resources.

- Increase educational funding and outreach efforts by all agencies and organizations that have a stake in agriculture and natural resources. Support is needed for programs that promote agricultural and environmental awareness in schools at the state level and from private foundations and organizations.
- Encourage communication, education and partnerships between farm and non-farm groups (agriculture and commerce), development planners, state and local government regarding resource use and environmental quality.
- Educate legislators about the importance of issues surrounding urban encroachment and its impact on rural and agricultural communities.

Water issues fall into two categories: supply/demand and quality. As our population increases, water uses for municipal purposes will dramatically increase and water available for agricultural irrigation will be reduced. This situation creates a need for improved efficiency and conservation in urban water use and policies to facilitate fair transfers of water rights from rural to urban users. This session identified three common areas of concern: Availability and Redistribution, Regulation, and Flooding and Drought Mitigation. Recommendations are as follows:

AVAILABILITY AND REDISTRIBUTION

- Develop a comprehensive statewide, integrated management plan. This plan should include “needs” and water use, especially agricultural use patterns.
- Establish a task force of stakeholders to ensure consistency.
- Update information currently available (quality and quantity).

◀ Water Use & Environmental Issues



REGULATION

- Develop comprehensive watershed management plans with specific implementation goals/steps for improving the management of watersheds.
- Provide incentives to encourage the use of BMPs.
- Relax existing regulations, place a moratorium on new regulations, except in emergencies, until current regulations are enforced or effectiveness is analyzed, e.g. (Clean Water Act).
- Encourage inter-agency and stakeholder cooperation and coordination to avoid duplication of effort and to share information between agencies.

FLOODING AND DROUGHT MITIGATION

- Encourage changes to drought response law (S 688).
- Enforce regulation (implementation) of sediment law.
- Encourage storage (impoundments) of water use during droughts at individual and state levels; monitor water levels in wells, streams, lakes and aquifers.
- Implement long-term water conservation and use strategies.



■ Conclusion

Input received from this summit was useful, but there are limits to what can be accomplished in a one-day event. Issues discussed within each of the breakout sessions play a vital role in South Carolina's agricultural production, natural resources management and sustainable economic development. This conference provided a comprehensive forum for dialogue, bringing together a diverse group, many of whom are leaders in the area of agricultural and natural resource management, research, development and education. Through this open forum, the summit encouraged useful discussion and brought issues to the table that might not have surfaced otherwise.

The summit is only the beginning of what should be an ongoing process. It is the goal of the planning committee that this initial forum operate as a catalyst for action. While some of the identified/suggested solutions can be achieved at the state level, others can be realized simply through improved communications between federal, state and local level agencies and entities.

The summit process has provided valuable information and direction for South Carolina's agricultural and natural resource leaders and agencies. From the information gained here, new programs, research and incentives will be considered to help meet the growing and changing demands of the citizens of this state.

As South Carolina continues to grow and change, public policies must be adapted to ensure that our environment and natural resource base is not diminished, while allowing for economic prosperity, quality of life and respect for the rights of private property owners.

Representatives from the State's leading agricultural, conservation and natural resources management organizations and universities who assisted in the organization and planning of this event now have a responsibility to ensure continuance of the process, and transfer of the valuable knowledge and information gained at the first Governor's Summit on Agriculture and Natural Resources to the people who need it most.



*Our gratitude is expressed to the following companies
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Ag First Farm Credit Bank
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Clemson University

South Carolina Association of Conservation Districts

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

South Carolina Farm Bureau Federation

USDA - Office of Rural Development

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